



First Week of Advent

HOPE

OPENING REFLECTION

PSALM 27:7–9, 11, 13–14

O Lord, hear my voice when I call;
have mercy and answer.
Of you my heart has spoken:
“Seek his face.”

It is your face, O Lord, that I seek;
hide not your face.
Dismiss not your servant in anger:
you have been my help.

Instruct me, Lord, in your way;
on an even path lead me.

I am sure I shall see the Lord’s goodness
in the land of the living.
Hope in him, hold firm and take heart.
Hope in the Lord!

INTRODUCTION TO THE TEXTS

We cannot serve two masters. We cannot listen equally well to the Good News of the Incarnation and to the clatter of a secular season of pious sentiments and credit cards. We cannot equate a financial quarter of accelerated commercial activity with the Church’s Advent call for repentance. Advent disposes us to conversion

and single-mindedness. We are called to attend to our deepest needs and hopes: to realize the mitigation of human suffering through daily deeds of compassion for and service to our neighbors.

In his essay “The Good News of the Nativity” Thomas Merton presented Advent as a time for discerning what is most relevant for us individually and communally in this moment of our being alive together in history.

If Christ is the revelation of the whole meaning of humanity, if the meaning of human life is solely and entirely to be found in the fact that I am a child of God, then everything in my life becomes relevant or irrelevant in proportion as it tends to my growth as a member of Christ, as a child of God, and to the extension of Christ in the world of humankind through his Church.

Advent then is a time for judging the choices we make in how we are living out our lives. Advent is a ritual moment for confronting discomfiting truths. It catches us in the act of living unconnected from the Gospel, as if we were being photographed cutting into a steak at a restaurant’s window while another human being on the other side of the pane stands mesmerized by the size of the meat on our forks. Advent overturns our complacencies to realize the exceedingly narrow but true way of Christian discipleship. If we receive the good news of Christmas, let us attempt to accept Jesus’ hard stuff. Throughout Advent we need to heed the warning of Olivier Clément:

Every one who relinquishes the security of a sleepwalking existence is sooner or later

mortally wounded by the world's suffering.
But because God became man and took this
suffering on himself, the way of vulnerability
and death becomes for us resurrection.

—*On Human Being*, p. 58

MERTON'S VOICE

FROM *RAIDS ON THE UNSPEAKABLE*

We live in a time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power, and acceleration.

The primordial blessing, "increase and multiply," has suddenly become a hemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions and massed together, marshaled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with ourselves, nauseated with life.

As the end approaches, there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth.

As the end approaches, there is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention, for the awareness of our state. . . .

In the time of the end there is no longer room for the desire to go on living. The time of the end is the time when men call upon the mountains to fall upon them, because they wish they did not exist.

Why? Because they are part of a proliferation of life that is not fully alive, it is programmed for death. A life that has not been chosen, and can hardly be accepted, has no more room for hope. Yet it must pretend to go on hoping. It is haunted by the demon of emptiness. And out of this unutterable void come the armies, the missiles, the weapons, the bombs, the concentration camps, the race riots, the racist murders, and all the other crimes of mass society.

Is this pessimism? Is this the unforgivable sin of admitting what everybody really feels? Is it pessimism to diagnose cancer as cancer? Or should one simply go on pretending that everything is getting better every day, because the time of the end is also—for some at any rate—the time of great prosperity? (“The Kings of the earth have joined in her idolatry and the traders of the earth have grown rich from her excessive luxury” [Rev 18:3]). (pp. 70–72)

ANOTHER VOICE

GERARD THOMAS STRAUB, *FALLING SILENT*

In his book, *No Man Is an Island*, Thomas Merton wrote: “There must be a time of day when the man who makes plans forgets his plans, and acts as if he had no plans at all. There must be a time of day when the man who has to speak falls very silent. And his mind forms no more propositions, and he asks himself: Did they have any meaning? There must be a time when a man of prayer goes to pray as if it were the first time in his life he had ever prayed; when the man of resolutions puts his resolutions aside as if they had all been broken, and he learns a different wisdom: distinguishing the sun from the moon, the stars from the darkness, the sea from the

dry land, and the night sky from the shoulder of a hill”
(*No Man Is an Island*, 260).

I am at that time of day.

A time to fall silent and be still, a time to look deeply into the essence of my life, the essence of life itself, so much of which makes absolutely no sense. And because it makes no sense, I kept moving, kept doing in order not to be overcome by the apparent meaninglessness of it all.

I am in that time of day when I can sit alone . . . and ponder and pray.

This state of being alone has been forced upon me. I would not have had the courage to choose it myself, though I had within me a faint desire for genuine solitude.

I am at that time of day when I can give the day the time it deserves, the time required to allow something real to happen. I am at that time of day when I can be both silent and attentive . . . attentive to birds flying around my yard, and attentive to the flock of thoughts flying around inside of me.

I am at that time of day when I am free, free to find and love myself . . . and God. All the things that have been pulling at me for years, demanding my full attention, such as the endless responsibility of trying to right the injustice of chronic poverty, have suddenly vanished like a poorly constructed building in Haiti toppled by an earthquake.

I am at a *kairos* time of day, a time when I can give myself a chance to let go of everything I know in order to be carried along by the flow of all I do not know, the very flow of the mystery and true reality of life. Speaking about prayer and the essence of what we

truly need, Thomas Merton said, "We don't have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us."

I am going to give it time. I am going to enter the invisible chamber of my soul where I will try to shut out all cares, worries, distractions, idle thoughts . . . shut out all but God as I wait for God. Oddly enough, say all the saints and mystics, God is already there. It is I who am missing, hidden in the rubble of my own life, buried under the weight of my countless faults, failures, mistakes, and illusions. Now is the time to cast off the burden of the past with all its missteps, concern for the future with all its sudden uncertainty and seek to see the face of God in this present moment, in this *kairos* time of day.

I pray that the emptiness and darkness does not scare me, does not prompt me to seek the false light of the world and all its empty promises and illusions. My past experience has taught me that whenever the light of God truly penetrates my inner being, I am able to see clearly how far I am from God, how great the contrast is between who and what God is and who and what I am. This is a time for renewal, a time for rejuvenation, a time to enter the fullness of life.

We live in dark times, in an age of deep despair. Without an inner sense of depth and freedom we easily become oppressed by the darkness and despair, victims of our circumstances. With God, we can see and move beyond our limitations. God created us for growth, for an ever-expanding realization of the divinity within us. In God, there is true freedom. Outside of God, there is only bondage.

For me, seeing so much suffering in the massive slums of the world forced me to forget myself, my own limitations, and hear the silent voice of God calling me to respond, not only to the shameful injustice, but also to God's endless mercy and love. In seeing so many starving kids with bloated bellies and the overwhelming need of the poor, I became less concerned with my own subjective needs and harmful compulsions, and more aware of the self-emptying love of Christ which I needed to imitate to the best of my ability. But the noise of life sometimes distracted me and rendered me deaf to God and capable of only hearing my own confused and rambling voice.

Without the stillness and silence of solitude, we easily slip back into the mediocrity of a comfortable Christianity which is no match for the gun-toting, hopeless nihilism of postmodern life where everything is reduced to a commodity for sale, where unbridled greed has caused a catastrophic global economic recession, where materialism without qualification and sex without love are affirmed and championed, where mainstream corporations distribute pornography without shame or reproach, where dialogue has given way to vitriolic hate speech, where conflicts are settled by violence, where barbarous acts of terrorism threaten all, where blind religious fundamentalism passes for true faith, where drug addiction and alcoholism are rampant, where thousands of kids die every day from hunger, and where selfishness and individualism have created prisons of poverty and are destroying the earth. In stillness and silence we are able to catch a glimmer of the interconnectivity of all life, to see the sun as our

brother and the moon as our sister, to see that all of humanity and all of creation as part of our family.

Even in solitude I am powerless to create (or even merit) the desire of my heart, the desire to see the face of God. It is only by grace that God gives us eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to understand. And the lived reality of God's grace and presence leads us, in our own fragility, to greater and greater heights of compassion for others.